

SUMMARY OF PROPOSED AMENDMENTS TO STANDARDS OF ACCREDITATION

Goals:

- (1) To reconfirm the Virginia Board of Education's commitment to Virginia's academic standards. *These amendments do not lower a single standard or extend the timetable for reaching the standards.*
- (2) To identify and target for early intervention and intensive assistance those schools that need the most help and attention, so that remedial action will be undertaken immediately, not years from now.
- (3) To define consequences and rewards for schools that achieve, or fail to achieve, the standards, in a constructive way that recognizes schools that have made major strides, yet have not met the standards, and which recognizes and rewards schools that have exceeded the standards.
- (4) To encourage Virginia students and schools to reach even higher than the current minimum standards.
- (5) To create a recognition and awards program that promotes innovation, creativity, and mentoring among Virginia educators.

Summary of Key Amendments:

Encouraging Students to Reach Higher:

- Create a mechanism to allow tests such as Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) to be used along with Standards of Learning (SOL) tests for high school graduation verified credits at the student's option. Results on these tests would also count in the school's pass rates for accreditation purposes.

Rationale: The SOL have always been intended to be a floor, not a ceiling, on student achievement. We want to encourage as many Virginia students as possible to reach even higher than the SOL. By allowing verified credits for AP and IB tests, it will encourage more Virginia students to take AP and IB courses and tests. Thus, no student will be held back who can reach higher.

- Create new diploma seals to recognize outstanding student achievement. The *Governor's Seal of Advanced Academic Excellence* will be awarded to students who receive the Advanced Studies Diploma and who make superior scores on the AP (4 or higher) or IB (6 or higher) tests when substituting those tests for SOL tests to earn verified credits. The *Board of Education's Seal of Academic Excellence*, *Superintendent's Seal of Academic Achievement*, and *Commonwealth's Seal of Academic Achievement* shall be awarded to students who achieve other measures of

academic excellence. The *Board of Education Vocational Seal* shall be awarded to students who demonstrate outstanding achievement in academic and vocational studies.

Rationale: To encourage and recognize students who reach for higher achievement levels.

Identifying and Bringing Needed Early Change to Low-Performing Schools:

- Establish a series of intermediate annual benchmarks for SOL test pass rates in the four core academic areas of English, math, science and history/social studies between now and the end of the 2003 academic year that clearly define the expected progress of schools. These benchmarks would increase each year in a “stairstep” approach (see chart in attachment). Schools that have student pass rates at or above these annual benchmarks will be "Provisionally Accredited."

Rationale: To build upon the current SOA as to what constitutes acceptable annual progress required to achieve provisional accreditation status during the 1999-2003 implementation phase.

- Between now and the end of the 2003 academic year, there shall be a new accreditation sub-category known as "Provisionally Accredited / Needs Improvement" for schools that do not reach the annual benchmarks, but which are within 20 percentage points of the benchmarks. Schools that are 20 or more percentage points below the annual benchmarks will be "Accredited with Warning in (academic area of deficiency) ."

Rationale: By separating the schools which are at or near the annual benchmarks from those that are far behind, resources and intensive monitoring and assistance can be focused on the schools that really need it as soon as possible. Refining the “Accredited with Warning” category to identify the academic area(s) of deficiency, will make it clear where the help and improvement should be focused.

- Schools that are "Accredited with Warning" in either English or math will be expected to adopt an instructional model or method with a documented track record of success at raising student achievement in reading or math.

Rationale: Schools that are 20 or more percentage points behind the annual benchmarks in the essential skills of reading or math must begin to change now by adopting proven instructional methods. We cannot wait another seven years for structural reforms to be adopted in low-performing schools in these critically important skills. The new accreditation ratings will better identify these schools immediately to bring about fundamental change and remedial action.

- An “Academic Review” of each school that is “Accredited with Warning” will be conducted immediately by review teams supervised by the state Department of Education. This academic review will focus on whether the school has aligned its curriculum with the SOL, whether the daily class schedule could be restructured to devote more time to academic areas of weakness, whether test data is being used effectively to target areas of weakness, and whether teaching-staff development resources are being used efficiently to improve areas of weakness. This academic review report shall become a key document in later evaluations of the school for remedial actions, should the school fail to achieve accreditation on schedule.

Rationale: The purpose of the baseline academic review is to determine immediately if the school’s poor performance is because of obvious factors such as a failure to align curriculum so that material being tested is being taught in the classroom. The results of the review are available to the school for its own remedial use.

- Following the initial academic review, the Governor’s Best Practice Centers in each region will be available to work extensively and continuously to assist low-performing schools in developing and implementing the School Improvement Plan that all schools Accredited with Warning must produce.

Rationale: The role of the Governor’s Best Practice Centers is to help schools on an ongoing basis. Schools must request this assistance and cooperate voluntarily with the Centers.

- Each school “Accredited with Warning” must file an annual report with the state detailing its progress in implementing its School Improvement Plan. Together with the report of the baseline academic review, these reports will form a record of the school’s improvement efforts that will be important in evaluating the school should the school fail to achieve accreditation by the end of the 2006 academic year.

Rationale: Building a record of the school’s efforts to improve student performance will be a key indicator in determining which actions to take after 2006 if the school is still failing to achieve necessary levels of student achievement.

Labeling with More Precision Schools that Have Lost Accreditation:

- Any school that has failed to achieve accreditation under current academic standards by the end of the 2006 academic year will be rated in the category of "Accreditation Denied," as in the current SOA. The amendments establish new sub-categories within this overall category to label more precisely schools based on their individual status. A school that has shown significant improvement and come very near the standard will be eligible for the rating of "Accreditation Denied / Improving School Near Accreditation." This designation is for schools that have reached the pass-rate standard in English, have at least 60% pass rates in the other academic areas, and have increased their pass rates by at least 25 percentage points since 1999 in the

academic areas in which they have fallen short. Schools may retain this designation for up to three years as long as they continue to make progress in the areas short of the 70% pass-rate standard.

Rationale: While we should not – and will not - lower the standard, and these schools will still lose their accreditation, we should recognize those schools which have improved greatly and come very near the standard. More accurate labeling will help to inform parents and the public better.

- A school that has not met the improvement criteria for "Accreditation Denied / Improving School Near Accreditation" status may apply to the state Board for the rating "Accreditation Denied / Reconstituted School" by voluntarily undergoing a successful reconstitution under the criteria defined in the SOA. A school that refuses to undergo a reconstitution shall be labeled "Accreditation Denied / Failed to Reconstitute."

Rationale: A school that voluntarily undergoes a reconstitution should be recognized as making the effort to bring about fundamental change and improvement. Based upon our legal research and advice of legal counsel, the State Board of Education does not have the current legal authority to mandate actions beyond denying accreditation, so the Board must use its accreditation labeling authority to bring about the fundamental changes it believes necessary. A school which has lost accreditation, yet still refuses to undertake substantial changes, shall be so designated.

- Reconstitution will take place after a comprehensive audit by a state audit team. The team will review the entire record of the school dating back to the initial academic review when the school was first Accredited with Warning. The audit team will make specific recommendations based on the school's record and progress, or lack of progress, on several academic indicators. The base principle of reconstitution is to evaluate all aspects of the school, including instructional methods, the principal and teaching staff, and administrative operations.

Rationale: Reconstitution must be real, not cosmetic, for the designation to be approved by the state Board. The role of the state audit team is to review the entire record of the school and base its recommendations on that record and other factors.

- Beginning with the ratings earned during the 2007-08 academic year, accreditation be determined by using a three-year rolling average of student pass rates.

Rationale: Once a school has achieved accreditation, it will be judged more fairly by averaging three years' worth of scores, to get a more comprehensive picture of the school's academic performance over time.

Recognizing and Rewarding Successful Schools:

- Establish immediately two new sub-categories of accreditation: "Fully Accredited with Honors" for schools that achieve pass rates of at least 80% in all four academic areas and "Fully Accredited with High Honors" for schools that achieve pass rates of 90% in all areas.

Rationale: We want our schools to aim much higher than simply getting 70% of their students to pass the SOL (or AP or IB tests). We want to aim for 100%. These categories will recognize those schools who are reaching higher achievement levels.

- Schools that achieve fully accredited status will receive waivers from state regulations. Schools that receive fully accredited with honors status will receive even more significant waivers of state regulations.

Rationale: Education policy-makers in other states have indicated that regulatory relief is one of the most desired forms of rewards for schools who are successful at raising achievement. If schools are academically successful, the state should give them more freedom to do things "their way" as long as they remain successful in academic achievement.

Recognizing Outstanding Schools and School Divisions Who Help Others

- Establish the following awards to recognize schools and school divisions which provide assistance to their fellow schools and school divisions. These awards are *Superior School of Merit* and the *Superior School Division of Merit*.
- A *Superior School of Merit* is an accredited school that helps another school make progress towards achieving accreditation. A *Superior School Division of Merit* is a school division that provides assistance on a significant scale to schools in other school divisions.

Rationale: To encourage schools and school divisions to share their successful practices and materials with other schools. We want all schools to improve, not just the majority of them.

Recognize the Critically Important Role of Principals and Teachers

- Recognize in the SOA the important role of principals in the accountability process and encourage school divisions to give principals the maximum amount of authority necessary to run their schools.

Rationale: Principals are the linchpin of school improvement and should be recognized for their role. If principals are to be held accountable, local school divisions should give principals maximum authority.

- Create the awards of *Master Principal of Distinction* and *Master Teacher of Distinction* for principals and teachers who have mentored other principals and teachers successfully.

Rationale: Encourage and recognize principals and teachers who help their peers to be better principals and teachers.

- Create the award of *Master Creative Educator* for outstanding creativity in the classroom by a teacher.

Rationale: Encourage and recognize creative teaching techniques.

Protections for Students:

- It shall be stated explicitly in the Standards of Accreditation that any individual student who receives a Virginia high school diploma has a diploma of equal value to all other graduates, regardless of the accreditation status of his or her school. The accreditation status of the school shall not be reported on student transcripts.

Rationale: Many students graduate from unaccredited private schools or home schooling and have no problem getting into college or getting jobs. We want to ensure that colleges and employers recognize that a student's Virginia high school diploma is equal in value regardless of the accreditation status of the student's school.

- Superintendents must verify in writing by July 1st of each year that the curriculum of his or her school division has incorporated the SOL into each school's curriculum and that the SOL are being taught in the classroom to all test-eligible children.

Rationale: More than four years after the SOL were adopted (June 1995), there are still schools which have not incorporated the SOL into their curricula. Obviously students will not do well on the SOL tests if they are not being taught the material in the classroom.

- Encourage through the SOA local school divisions to offer and expand programs in the study and exploration of the fine arts.

Rationale: In recognition of the importance of the arts, students should have greater opportunities to take art or music courses and programs.

Attachments:

- * Table Showing Accreditation Categories and Implementation Schedule
- * Chart Showing New Annual Progress Benchmarks